

WILL GUILTY

In which a voice from the grave names guilty man

By MICHAEL WILLIAMS.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Billy Foster, reporter for the New York Evening Wire, was sent to a club to get an interview with Acton Clough, nephew of John B. Clough, a multi-millionaire financier. Acton Clough, who was an artist, had recently exhibited a strange and fantastically morbid painting called "The Snake" in a Fifth Avenue gallery. Rumor said that the picture was based on a personal experience of the queer young artist. While on his way to the club Foster passed the mansion of old John B. Clough, and heard a woman scream with terror in the house. He rushed into the house, and there in the great library sat the multi-millionaire and a dagger was buried to the hilt in his heart. "The Snake" was opposite the dead man, and was slashed into ribbons. Foster bribed a groom in the house for photographs of the murdered millionaire and other scenes connected with the tragedy, and rushing to the nearest telephone reported the mystery to the Evening Wire office, which quickly printed the story and scored a great beat on all the other New York newspapers. Marcella Vincent, a beautiful young society girl, was hesitating whether to marry Billy or his rival Philip Holbrook, a star reporter of the Evening Budget. When she saw Billy's great "beat" she was on the point of deciding in his favor.

CHAPTER II (Cont'd)

Marcella hoped with all her heart that none of the other reporters would get ahead of "her boys," as she thought of them, and interfere with this clean trial of their prowess as reporters. There were certain men on the morning papers whom she feared, but none on the evening, and she felt that both Holbrook and Foster would do both day and night work for their papers until the mystery was solved either by one of them or by some other man.

At noon a hurriedly penciled note came to her from Billy Foster. Dear Marcella:

Have you divined that the big beat today is mine? You know what we agreed it should mean. Now, although I was quite certain this morning that the matter was settled, since then I have been thinking it over. Old Phil Holbrook showed me this morning what a plucky kid he is, and I sure don't want to stand in a lower class for pluckiness than he. I believe that you will think as I do—that the race is just begun. The big beat will come in the printing first, the name of the man who killed Clough. But I am coming to see you tonight.

"Billy, you are a brick!" thought Marcella warmly. "You've cleared the road for me. I didn't care about telling you this. Billy, you're all right. I wonder how Phil showed his pluck this morning? I think I can guess. He shut that strong mouth of his and marched right along after he thought that Billy had won."

Then back she plunged to reading the fast-coming editions and extras.

VANISHED

Thorough Search Fails to Reveal Whereabouts of Henry Brewster, Young and Popular Nephew of the MURDERED MILLIONAIRE

Police Confident that He Can Throw Considerable Light on Ever-DEEPENING MYSTERY

Is Young-Man About Town, Polo Champion, and Very Well-Known Whirl. So ran flaming headlines in the Budget. Beneath them were a few lines hastily inserted just before the edition went to press.

Strange circumstances have been unearthed by Detective-Sergeant McGuire, who is handling the Clough murder mystery for headquarters, which may prove to be clues leading to a solution.

McGuire went to the bachelor rooms of Henry Brewster, the rich society leader and horseman in the Arlino Hotel, to question Mr. Brewster regarding any knowledge he might have of his uncle's movements on the night of his murder. The young clubman was not found. His rooms were in disorder, and the clerks at the hotel averred that Mr. Brewster had packed a trunk and a hand-bag about midnight the night before, and had hastily left the hotel.

McGuire has so far failed to find Mr. Brewster at any of his usual haunts in the city; and he, Mr. Brewster, has not appeared at the house of mourning in Fifth Avenue, nor sent any messages. The stock-broker man at the Grand Central Station told McGuire that he had seen Mr. Brewster, with his valet, at about 1 o'clock this morning, hastening through the gate to the 1-38 Chicago express.

On the front page of the Wire were the following lines:

John B. Clough's WILL Cannot Be FOUND

Document Distributing Sain Magnate's FIFTY MILLIONS LOST

May Have Been Stolen or Destroyed by ASSASSIN.

The rumor gains ground that when John B. Clough was murdered he had been going over a new will, drawn by his attorney since that day when Acton Clough, the artist, put his picture, "The Snake" on exhibition. It is thought that the will was in his room.

James Clarkson, the murdered millionaire's attorney, drove furiously to the Fifth Avenue mansion in a motor-car, shortly before 10 o'clock this morning, and at once hurried to the room of death, where the corner, Dr. Schmitz, had preceded him. When the corner was reached he told a Wire reporter that in his opinion Mr. Clough had lived for an hour or more after having been stabbed, and that he had been dead for about ten or eleven hours, which would make the time when the fatal blow was struck about half past ten or eleven o'clock last night.

Dr. Schmitz also said the following words:

"Mr. Clarkson is much puzzled by the disappearance of the will, and—"

At this point Mr. Clarkson, who was highly agitated, appeared, overheard Dr. Schmitz, and violently dragged him back within the house. When Corner Schmitz appeared again he refused to answer even the simplest questions, and hurried away.

The inquest will be held tomorrow or the following day.

When Mr. Clarkson came out of the

house he was asked if Mr. Clough's will had disappeared, but he declared that he could not and would not speak a word on the subject connected with the tragedy—at least, not at this time.

He hurriedly entered his motor-car, in company with Detective-Sergeant McGuire, and drove to police headquarters, where he was closeted with the chief of the detective bureau for more than half an hour. It has been known for some time that John B. Clough's will contained several large bequests to charitable societies and institutions, as well as making provision for his nephews, Henry Brewster and Acton Clough. Whether or not he was about to make radical changes in the document at the time of his murder, or had already done so, is a matter of which only Mr. Clarkson and the witnesses to the document can know anything definite.

Acton Clough, the artist, arrived at the mansion at about half past nine o'clock. He was extremely nervous, and said in a trembling voice that he had nothing whatever to say to the press at this time. He visited his uncle's bedroom, where, it is said on good authority, he broke down and wept, and was later closeted with Detective-Sergeant McGuire and the corner for more than an hour.

After this conference he insisted on telephoning for Harper Colville, his personal friend and attorney, and would answer no more of the inquiry and searching questions put to him.

He finally drove away in his motor-car to the Architects' Club, where he has rooms. His counsel consented to give out the following statement for his client:

"You may say to the public that Mr. Acton Clough, who is a nervous and highly strung man, of the keenest sensibilities, is well-nigh prostrated by the tragic death of his uncle, for whom he had the highest regard as being his greatest benefactor. He says that I may frankly state to you that the only subject of discord existing between him and his uncle was concerning his picture, recently exhibited in the Essex Gallery. Mr. Acton Clough would not comply with his uncle's desire to have the picture removed."

"Last night he learned that the picture had been taken from the gallery by a man who had brought a written order, signed by a forgery of his (Acton Clough's) name. Visiting his uncle last night, he found the picture in his room, much mutilated, and accused him of removing and destroying it. Work; whereupon Mr. Clough declared that he had not done so, but that the picture had been brought to the house by a man who said he had been sent by Acton Clough, and that on opening the package he had found it in its present mutilated condition."

"Mr. Acton Clough desires me to say for him that he now believes his uncle's story, strange as it was, to be true, and that he bitterly regrets the harsh feelings that existed between them when they parted, shortly before 10 o'clock last night."

Turning the page at the end of the column, Marcella saw a large reproduction of the picture which, after stirring the town's interest—indeed, the whole art world's interest—had now come to play such a singular part in this tragedy. Though she had seen the original when it hung in the gallery, and many reproductions, she studied it closely.

It was a ghastly thing, yet full of a subtle fascination that plunged the mind among singular dreams and imaginings at which the heart shudders. The newspaper reproductions lacked the colors of the original, but as Marcella gazed absently at the black-and-white replica, the original painting rose before her mind in all its vividness.

She saw again the terrible snake—the image of all that is eternally latent and repulsive to normal human beings—looking out with peculiar, mocking eyes. Under its heavy, sullen folds, sleek and shining and spotted, were scattered the bones and skulls of men and women, and in the foreground of the picture advanced a procession of its destined victims.

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Now, the place where it crouched was the strangest thing about this strange production. It was drawn and colored in such a manner that, in some lights and to different orders of eyesight, it assumed different appearances. Some critics believed that this dusky, amorphous place was intended to represent a human heart, and that the snake was the symbol of the sin or wickedness that at some time in all lives either tempts or impels the soul to ruin.

Other critics went further and said that the shadows had the dusky lineaments of a human face in form, a female figure, and that Acton Clough was preaching against the wives of women. Others declared that these dusky lines were meant for a man and that the artist represented the spirit of mammon. All agreed, however, that it was altogether too horrible for much study and that the man who had painted it must be perforce morbid and unbalanced.

Marcella shuddered, remembering the effect of the canvas.

"Ah, Mr. Acton Clough will have to explain much more than he has explained concerning the events of last night," she thought. "The mind cannot place that awful picture on canvas could easily conceive such a crime as took place in the great house on Fifth Avenue. God grant that my thoughts do not wrong him, however."

"And what," she mused, "can be the meaning of the hurried midnight flight of Henry Brewster—the calmly correct young society darling, who was on the best of terms with the gloomy old reclusive millionaire? Why did he leave the city? Will he return? What story will he have to tell?"

"Oh, my boys!" she continued,

thinking of Phil and Billy, "you have a hard fight before you. I hope that one of you will win."

As she rose to go, she caught sight of her editor in the dingy mirror above the art editor's desk, and smiled at the pretty face that smiled back at her. A glow filled her heart.

"A fair lady, you know," she said to herself in the glass, "is not for faint hearts."

CHAPTER III.

THE FIGHT IS ON!

Two young reporters, one in the service of the Wire, the other of the Budget, whose sole duty it was to stay near the telephone booths in the Hotel Girard on upper Fifth Avenue, raced from that hotel at top speed to the Clough house the next morning. One of them wanted Philip Holbrook, the other Billy Foster, who waited in front of the house for the attorney, James Clarkson.

"Billy," cried the Wire reporter, drawing Foster aside, "the office directly the question foremost in all the reporters' minds."

Brewster hesitated; his face paled a little. After a moment he started: "Well, then broke off."

He looked at White, then at McGuire, as if for encouragement. They both sat stolidly silent. Finally, as if to get it over with, he blurted out:

"In my belief—almost to my knowledge—Acton Clough killed my uncle."

A cub reporter in the back of the room gasped.

"I understand," Brewster went on gloomily, "that men are already on the way to arrest him. Isn't that so, Mr. McGuire?"

The detective nodded.

There was silence for a moment, then a voice asked:

"What makes you say so, Mr. Brewster?"

"In answer to that, possibly the best thing for me to do is briefly to repeat the story I have already told the detective bureau," said Brewster, looking at his attorney.

"Yes, do so, Henry," said White.

"The dagger which was used belongs to Acton Clough. Again, a servant in my uncle's house told me that my cousin ran from the bedroom at 10 o'clock, after sounds of a loud quarrel with my uncle. These and a few other matters of even greater importance I felt it my duty to lay before the police, and Acton Clough is to be arrested."

"What are the other matters you refer to?"

"Why, they are numerous and damaging," began Brewster, with a sudden flush of excitement. "Acton Clough—"

"Remember that we have agreed with the district attorney and the detective to withhold the rest of the evidence in the fear that it might damage the case when it comes to a trial if prematurely exposed. I think, gentlemen, that you must now excuse Mr. Brewster."

A large motor-car had driven to the door, and into this Brewster, White

and Detective McGuire hurried and were whirled away.

The reporters hastened to adjacent telephones.

Ten minutes later Acton Clough was brought to headquarters and was at once hurried before the chief of detectives and the assistant district attorney, Clough's attorney, Harper Colville, came hurrying to Mulberry street and was admitted to the conference. A little later, the whole party followed by a regiment of reporters and artists, proceeded to the police court, where the prisoner, in a state of partial collapse, was formally accused of murder. Through his counsel, he pleaded not guilty, waived examination, and was placed in a cell in Murderers' Row in the Tombs.

All newspaper representatives, much to their disgust, were denied an interview with Clough, and his attorney had little to say in addition to the fact that there might be an interview in the future and that beyond doubt his client's innocence would be proved at his trial.

"Mr. Acton Clough is certainly up against it good and hard," said another reporter.

Holbrook said nothing. He hurried to his office to write a new lead to the story, and there he found a note from Marcella which read:

My dear Phil:

I received your little note, containing your reference to the great beat made by Billy and your congratulations to him and me.

This is premature, Phil, as even Billy sees and tells me. Anybody might have chance to be walking along Fifth Avenue when the servant screamed from the window. That chance puts no feather in Billy's cap. And you, too, I hear, happened to hear about the murder by accident, before the other reporters.

So Phil, I think the great beat will be the story in which I am written for the first time the solution of this crime. Billy was the first one to point out Acton Clough's suspicious connection with the crime. I know that he is working to prove the artist guilty. But if you have a different theory and prove it, why—Need I say more?

MARCELLA.

Holbrook sank down at his desk and rejoiced. His unrelaxing work for the past thirty-six hours had tired him more than usual, so he, because he had been working so long for his paper without the incentive that before had so often spurred him on—the hope that the story might develop so that he might win his heart's desire.

"And there is still a chance—still a chance!" he thought, and unconsciously said the words aloud.

"Chance for what?" asked the assistant city editor. "Going dotty over the case, Holbrook?"

"Not I," said Phil happily. "I'm as fresh as paint. I mean that there is a chance for Acton Clough."

"In the first place," said Brewster,

phones that Brewster's came to light. He's just driven to police headquarters and is in consultation with the chief of detectives."

The Budget man bore the same message to Phil Holbrook and in three minutes both Holbrook and Foster were racing to Mulberry street in the automobiles which each now had constantly in service.

They arrived at their destination just as Brewster finished his interview with the head of the detective bureau and was leaving the private office with his attorney, Copeland White, and Detective-Sergeant McGuire. Not only Foster and Holbrook, but a score of other reporters as well, surrounded the murdered millionaire's nephew and begged for an interview. In all the outside a battalion of snapshot photographers awaited the young man's appearance.

Copeland White spoke for Brewster, who looked at the eager reporters with a frown of annoyance on his handsome face. The young society man was a tall, strong man, with a clear blue eye and a haughty bearing.

"Mr. Brewster will consent to an interview," said White, "on one condition, which is that the reporters for all the newspapers be present in a body and ask all questions they wish to ask, in order that Mr. Brewster may not be disturbed by a constant coming and going of reporters."

"Perhaps Mr. Brewster will be kind enough to step across the street to the press headquarters," said Max Friedman, dean of the Mulberry street corps.

To this suggestion Brewster assented by a nod, and the start was made.

When, however, he went out into the street and saw the photographers aiming their cameras at him from all sides, his appearance of studied indifference forsook him and something of the natural man concealed beneath the smooth polish of the society beau came to the surface. Many of the reporters may have remembered that in his college days Brewster had been the champion heavyweight boxer and one of the star football players of his time.

At any rate he snapped a savage oath, and dashing quickly to right and left, striking twice and kicking twice, he had in less than ten seconds laid out three photographers on the sidewalk, and had sent two cameras flying to ruin from the hands of their owners. White and McGuire succeeded in restraining the angry club-man and hurried him across the street.

Once within the newspaper house, Brewster calmed himself and sat down, facing the reporters, little knowing that at least five or six of the assembled men were artists, busily sketching him as he talked.

"Now, if you please, tell me just what it is that you wish to ask me," he said.

"We would like to know whether you have any idea of who killed your uncle," said Philip Holbrook, asking

"Very well, then," Brewster looked fixedly at the floor for a moment, as if to collect his thoughts. A deeper silence of interested attention fell upon the group of reporters.

"Whenever I was in or near New York, it was my habit to visit my uncle at some time during each day," Brewster went on. "My last visit to him was at about 5:30 o'clock on the night he was murdered. I had dined at the Planters Club and was on my way to the Frivoly Theater. My uncle received me in his bedroom, to which he had been confined with a bad cold for two days."

"He had just received and opened the parcel containing a picture by Acton Clough. I knew that he had been much disturbed by the notoriety the picture had caused, though he had said little about it to me, save to ask me once my opinion of the production, which I gave in unmistakable terms."

"I gather then, Mr. Brewster, that you disapprove of the picture," said Holbrook.

Brewster looked at him in surprise and the other reporters glared at him for his interruption.

"How could any sane or decent man do anything but disapprove?" asked Brewster.

"As I entered the bedroom that last night, my uncle pointed to the picture, which was cut to ribbons, and said: 'There is the end of that abomination, Henry. Acton has disappointed me—bitterly disappointed me. His conduct is unpardonable. I shall never forgive him—never!'"

"I told him that I was glad the picture was destroyed, and his excited manner grew."

"If Acton does not do in the future exactly as I wish," he cried, "he shall not remain a nephew of mine. I'll cut him off. I'll let him see what value his daubing has in the real world."

"Now, although I've seen very little of Acton Clough and we are in no sense intimate, I have always held a high regard for his artistic ability, and I said to my uncle: 'I think that this picture is but a freak. Surely Acton will become less morbid in his art. He is still very young, and fresh from Paris, where they do not value things by American standards.'"

"My uncle sighed. 'Perhaps so. I hope that it will be as you say. I have sent for Acton to come to me tonight and I shall settle the whole matter one way or the other. I have but two heirs, Henry, and by tomorrow I may have but one.'"

"The subject was then changed and we talked for a while on other topics. I left him at 9 o'clock and drove to the theater. At midnight I was suddenly called from the city on a matter of personal concern. As soon as I saw the terrible news in the Chicago newspapers I hurried home."

"May we be allowed to know some of your more immediate reasons for laying the crime at your cousin's door?" asked Holbrook.

"In the first place," said Brewster,

the arrest of the artist had done nothing to clear the matter. The Wire and the Budget, with all other newspapers, were eagerly seeking the detailed story of the occurrences in the millionaire's bedroom and the identity of the criminal. Their armies of reporters and private detectives, to say nothing of the regular forces of police and the private sleuths employed by the attorneys for the dead millionaire, for Henry Brewster and Acton Clough, were sweeping in all directions with, as it were, a drag-net for secrets.

No one knew all the strange things which were discovered, for whatever the detectives learned was kept secret, until the time should come to reveal it on the witness-stand. The secrets, however, discovered by the reporters were rushed with the utmost celerity into the daylight of publicity.

It fell to Billy Foster to make one of the most startling finds during the second week of the story's progress.

One afternoon he, Holbrook, and Marcella Vincent, all after an interview, met at the office of the assistant district attorney who was in charge of the Clough case. He was closeted, at the time, with Colville, Clough's attorney, and the three reporters foregathered in the outer office.

Foster and Holbrook were waiting to talk with the assistant district attorney and Colville, in the course of their daily rounds of interviews, wherein they continually kept in touch with the leading figures in the case, being animated by Mr. Mcawber's hope-buoy that something would turn up. Marcella was engaged in working up for the Sunday papers, a series of character sketches of all the principal characters in the gruesome drama.

That thing would turn up. Marcella was engaged in working up, for the Sunday paper, a series of character sketches of all the principal characters in the gruesome drama.

It was the first time the three friends had met together since the breaking of the big story, though both Foster and Holbrook had found time on different occasions to call on Marcella and to lay before her their separate troubles and perplexities and to receive encouragement and help, which she lavished impartially. For a moment there was a sense of embarrassment in the air, but this soon disappeared in Marcella's frank goodfellowship, and they sat down near each other and talked while they waited.

A number of detectives and clerks were busily numbering and arranging the exhibits in the case, a quantity of paraphernalia later to be used as evidence. The district attorney, a young and zealous officer, had made a pretty clean sweep of the dead millionaire's apartment.

Acton Clough's strange picture, swathed in paper, leaned against the open door of the big safe. In a corner stood the chair in which the body had been found. On the table was the blood-stained dagger which had ended the capitalist's career; near

by lay coiled the thin rawhide rope with which the murdered man had been bound, and around it were the bundles of papers, the miniature ebony sphinx, even the scattered wrapping paper and pieces of string, that had littered the floor and table.

"The presence of that rawhide rope was a singular thing," said Marcella in a low tone. "I wonder how such a thing got into the Clough mansion. Was it brought in by the murderer?"

Billy Foster smiled and glanced quizzically at Holbrook.

"Yes, it was brought in by the murderer," he said. "And since the news must already have been printed in the Wire, I don't mind saying that I found out today that the rawhide rope was a Western lariat which had been used as a decoration in Acton Clough's studio. Despite the artist's apparent frailty, an 'his devotion to the household of war,' he had, years ago, hunted and ridden down cattle on the plains, and still preserve a great fondness for Western objects. The dagger can be from Mexico, you know."

"Things are looking blacker and blacker for Acton Clough," said Marcella, shaking her head and looking at Holbrook.

That young man preserved an obstinate show of unconcern. There was a chill at his heart, nevertheless. In his mind, he was convinced that the artist was not guilty. But he could readily see that circumstantial evidence might convict him. The clue that he (Holbrook) was working on, was very shadowy and elusive, yet he was following it assiduously.

Pitying his distress, which she divined despite his silence and immobility, Marcella changed the topic.

"What a story that mystic little sphinx might tell, could it speak," she said.

"I've had the same thought," said Holbrook, intently regarding the ebony figure.

"And I," said Billy Foster. "Perhaps you remember how I used that sphinx for decoration in my first story. The thing fascinated me—it still does. It looks so much alive, as if it knew everything a man thought, as well as what he said or did."

"Well, Billy," said Marcella, "that may be more than a mere fancy—it may be a pursuable idea."

"What do you mean?" asked Billy.

"Oh, I'm not sure myself. But we women, you know, have strange intuitions at times," said the girl lightly, yet with an undertone of earnestness. "This whole matter is wrapped about with mystery. Perhaps this symbol of mystery is the clue to the revelation of it all."

"But how?" exclaimed Billy, while Holbrook merely smiled.

"I've already said I don't know. Investigate, Billy. Investigate. And while you're about it, investigate your pockets for a rubber band, please. This parcel of photographs has come apart and the string is lost."

"I haven't a band," said Foster. "Say, Tommy, what would he want this rubbish for?" asked Philip.

"I guess it's all right," said the clerk hesitatingly; "all this stuff comes from the Clough house, you know, and I don't know whether the boss wants it all or not."

"Oh, Tommy, what would he want this rubbish for?" asked Philip.

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